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I WISH I COULD ASK STEVE

MARK A. SARGENT*

IT was always very difficult to describe Steve Frankino. We often try to describe someone by comparing him to someone else. You couldn't do that with Steve, because there was no one like Steve. He was a genuinely unusual person. Not "unusual" in the sense of quirky or peculiar, although he had his quirks, as do the rest of us. He was unusual in the way he combined apparently contradictory traits in a way that was surprisingly harmonious.

For example, Steve was one of the most private persons I have ever met. One always sensed in Steve a reserve, an almost hidden place which he did not share with those who were not his intimates. At the same time, he was the warmest of men, and he could be one of the most gregarious. His dinner parties are legendary and he usually chose to travel (which he loved to do) with groups of friends. He would never impose himself on anyone, but when his faculty colleagues needed him, he was always there, ready to engage and ready to be helpful. The ultimate irony, perhaps, is that this private man chose to spend almost all his career in the most public of positions: that of law school dean.

It was perhaps as dean that Steve revealed his unique capacity for harmonizing contradictions. He was a leader who never sought attention for himself. Steve made hard decisions without showing how hard they were. He did not avoid conflict when it was necessary, but his preferred method of resolution was indirection; he was the subtlest of deans and a useful model for those of us whose instinct is to run headfirst into stone walls. Never one for the grand gesture, he loved operating discreetly behind the scenes, drawing attention to the accomplishments of others. Indeed, he was famous for his discretion. With Steve, a secret was a secret, something unusual in the frog pond of a law school. He was a man of the law, but at heart an aesthete: a lover of opera, the visual arts (including the decoration of the law school!) and a master of that grand symphony, the five-course Italian meal.

With all of his complexity, it is hard for those of us who knew him mostly as a colleague to convey a full sense of who he was. But his remarkable record as a law school dean is something that we can describe and praise. His many years of service at three separate law schools are themselves remarkable. Few deans can last that long. They either burn themselves out or meet their nemesis in one of the many constituencies a dean must satisfy. And very few can get themselves hired by three separate, and very different, law schools—and even fewer can thrive in all respects at all

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three law schools. Steve did all that. He did it, furthermore, during a time of radical change in legal education that was too much for many deans to handle. Steve led the law schools at Creighton, Catholic and Villanova when the changing expectations for faculty scholarship produced generational conflict on many law school faculties. He passionately supported the diversification of legal education as women and racial and ethnic minorities claimed their rightful places in the legal academy. He opened the windows to the new methodological perspectives on law that have transformed the way we think about law and the profession. Steve planted the seeds for a renewal of Catholic legal education at Villanova Law that are only now beginning to bear fruit. All of that required exceptional gifts of imagination and flexibility.

At Villanova, he conceived and led our first capital campaign, making our current and much larger campaign possible. He built a close relationship with Father Dobbin, making it possible for us to develop many new linkages between the Law School and the University and his expansion and modernization of Garey Hall enabled us to operate in that building for another decade, until we were ready to undertake our new building project. Perhaps most importantly, he hired outstanding new faculty who are now among our faculty leaders.

I owe a great debt to Steve personally. His achievements made Villanova tremendously attractive to me as a prospective dean. He had preserved and enhanced the Law School's outstanding reputation and provided a base upon which we could all build. Steve was deeply attuned to Villanova's uniquely positive culture, its strong sense of community and its Catholic identity. He left all that as a wonderful gift to his successor. Steve's humility and generosity also made him a wonderful ex-dean. He never claimed any special status for himself or tried to retain power or influence. He eagerly took on his duties as a full-time professor and soon won over a new generation of student admirers. He was always there for me when I needed advice and help, particularly in delicate situations in which his subtlety and reputation for integrity were just what was needed.

His sudden passing left me with the same sense of loss that we all share; but, I also find myself saying, as I face yet another of those challenges that deans cannot avoid, "I wish I could ask Steve about this." Because there really is no one else like Steve Frankino.